BERNARD SHAW

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AN EPITAPH

By
John Palmer
Author of "Peter Paragon"

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I

At midnight on 4th August 1914 all that literature hitherto described as "modern" passed quietly away in its sleep. This does not mean that there immediately arose a new generation of authors and readers. Things will superficially go on as before, possibly for years to come. It will be some time, even after the public has won back the leisure to refine upon its late sensations, before the literary revolution of August last will be clear to the observer. Established authors will change a little with the changed mood of the public; and the public will for long be quite unable to describe or make effective its sense of discomfort with the past. Nevertheless, there is no doubt at all that the ways of literature after the war are to be entirely altered. Already we know that certain

literary styles and methods which once were "effective," and admirably adapted to their purpose, have now become detestable. We have no room for insolence as a fine art, for dialectic display, for literary virtuosity. Literary manners are completely to be reformed; and with the manners the matter also will be changed. The return to simplicity, so frequently travestied in the age whose extinction is now decreed, is at last coming in sober truth. Every art is going to rid itself of the moral and intellectual casuistry in which it has so long abounded. Morality, duty, conscience, character—call it what you will—has suddenly become very simple. We shall stand no longer counting the pulse and taking the temperature of our deeds. We are going to be quite careless of the moral and social doctor. We shall shortly be looking back with wonder on the curious rhetorical and logical excesses of the first decade of the twentieth century.

The strength of this coming revolt is

measured by the impulsive and just hostility of the British public to the recent articles and letters of one who is, perhaps, the most notable of the organically extinct, but galvanically active, authors to whose existence the Great War has definitely put a term. Mr Bernard Shaw has amused and instructed us for many years. The object of this essay is to ask whether we cannot bid him farewell without bitterness. It is the result of a wish to obtain for a very remarkable man—the only British author who has won for the British drama any sort of international recognition—no more than the strictest justice.

Strict justice to any author at the present time implies that we allow for the general decline of our interest in literature—more especially in the literature of the immediate yesterday. This decline has been excessively mourned by those who see only the present confusion and reproach. It has even been said

that the great war has put back Art and Letters for a generation. This is a wholly false way of regarding the effect of the war upon literature; but it is perfectly natural in the authors whom the war has dispossessed to take a sombre view of the future. What has really happened to literature is something very different—it is really the reverse—from what is imagined by the authors who see the public turning from their books. The war has simply brought to maturity in a single season a process which already was in being. "Modern" literature already had passed the meridian. We had already begun to turn away from the intellectual criticism of society and from preoccupation with the nicer problems of conduct; and we were vaguely waiting for something simpler and more universal. The war has completed in the reader a revolution which was bound to occur by suddenly shooting into the mind a mass of raw and opulent matter,

with which the modern analyst with his small scales of the apothecary is unable to deal. Before this sudden unloading upon the mind of rapid impressions the author and his public alike are for the moment helpless. The author is either smitten into silence or he is forced to bring out of the heap of raw material samples merely, unshaped and untransmuted, which he offers to the public as "literature" of the war. There is, of course, no such thing, yet, as literature of the war. It will be years before the revolution of our point of view can get itself artistically uttered. When suddenly we are required to cease counting the hairs upon the head of humanity in order to contemplate the sacrifice of humanity in battalions upon altars erected to the simplest of virtues; when suddenly the old life is extinguished and an urgent question, never directly put to us before, sits upon every hearth; when fact becomes so vivid that no work of the imagination not grounded upon

universal truth can live in its fierce ray —then we are compelled suddenly to realise that neither literature nor life itself can ever seem the same. The books we had in the Press when war broke out—books which had to come out from sheer inertia of the publishing machine—simply prompted in us all a faint disgust and a mild wonder how ever we came to write them.

The immediate results, the results we see at present, are disquieting enough if we look only at the surface—at the collapse of the intellectual and imaginative interests which satisfied us a year or so ago. But we have to realise that this collapse has truly to be read, not as a collapse of literature and art, but as a crucible of new forms and aspirations. Meantime, until the new literature—literature which will imperishably record the true meaning of the events through which we are passing—begins to be written we must be content to move among the ruins of the

old. Life for the moment has put out literature. We have entered again into a period of the pamphlet—a period when the public insists on being its own interpreter. The public now requires to hold and handle the raw stuff of life for itself, to come into contact with the rough ore. It feels that even this is better than handling the strange, finished metals which came from the unfamiliar mines of yesterday.

Literary historians have falsely imagined that the pamphlet was a form of authorship peculiar to the Augustan age; or, more accurately, that it was a natural product of the period immediately preceding the invention of the daily newspaper. The pamphlet has been regarded as merely the device of a period which had not yet discovered how to work the newspaper. When the newspaper came to full competence, it was supposed that the pamphlet had been finally put out of action. There was no longer supposed to be any room

for the fugitive *libellum* dealing with a topic of the day. Such, briefly, has seemed to be the assumption of the historian; but the Great War has disproved all this. The pamphlet is now seen to be, not a mechanical link between two periods in the history of printing, but a distinct kind of authorship, bound to arise when the conditions of its being are favourable.

If we look at the periods in which the pamphlet has most prosperously flourished—the period of the Jacobean revolution, of the Marlborough and Napoleonic wars—we observe that these were times when events were supremely critical, when hardly anyone could be expected to escape from the appeal of the moment, when the thrill of life was too intense to suffer any very serious competition from the thrill of fancy. Those who in long years of security have had the untroubled leisure to compile histories of literature have hardly realised the way life has of suddenly putting out

of account everything but its own imperious need to be observed and grasped. Now, however, they are able to understand that there are times when even the writer of books is no longer able to live in his ivory tower, times when he is urged to come down into the street, hawking his ballads, lampoons, accounts and explanations. One very definite result of the Great War was felt immediately on its proclamation. Our literary and æsthetic interests paled as the stars pale when a house takes fire. It was for weeks impossible to settle to a book. The theatre utterly collapsed, ceasing to exist except as a strained effort to be merry. Even music was unable to come between its audience and the latest telegrams. Our obsession could not, of course, endure at this temperature and pressure; but the war remained, and will long remain, the first interest of our lives. In fact we are precisely in the position in which the English public stood when the

Petitioners and Abhorrers grappled for the Succession in the seventeenth century, or when the beacons were waiting to be fired in warning that Napoleon had landed on the English coast.

Is it therefore surprising that our authors have returned to the pamphlet? They were compelled to do so for self-preservation alone. No one at this time will seriously read anything but the latest news, information or argument about the war. They desire only first-hand records and experiences from the front. When, as some for a diversion will, they turn to literature it is either to classical or romantic literature—none of it later than the eighteen nineties—or to the lightest of contemporary adventurous or comic fiction. It follows that, if a modern author desires to be read, he must turn from the writing of books to the writing of pamphlets. It is unfair, however, to authors to assume that this is a true and com-

plete reading of their motive. They are not writing pamphlets because they cannot *sell* books. They are writing pamphlets because they cannot *write* books. The authors, like the public, are unable to escape from the great fact of their lives. They are as irresistibly compelled to write pamphlets as the public is compelled to read them. Popular playwrights have turned from the theatre to explain why we are at war. Popular novelists have turned from fiction to draw up the terms of peace. Oxford and Cambridge lecturers and professors have turned from their empty colleges and halls to vindicate the allied cause to the world, to track to its source the exact influence of the near Eastern question on the crisis of August last, to tell us what small nations have done in the past, or why the Turks are at Byzantium. All this pamphleteering is due to a sense they share with the public at large that, for the time being, the interest has gone out of their ordinary

pursuits; that everything under the sun, if it is to be justified, must be shown to have some bearing on what is happening in France and Poland.

This is simply the common-sense of the matter—a plain account of what has happened to readers and to those who write. But there is a good deal behind this common-sense which is only obscurely realised by the people affected. That the war has cut deeply into the late publishing season is clear to the most casual observer. It is less clear, but not less true, that the war has cut deeply into English literature. It is obvious that people have not leisure or patience for the old books; and they account for this by their unusual desire for half-a-dozen newspapers a day, and their positive hunger for information about their friends and enemies. It is less obvious that they have done for ever with the books which satisfied them six months ago, and that their impatience with the authors who pleased them

last July is due to far graver and more permanent reasons than they have yet discovered. The present outburst of pamphleteering does not merely mean that there is temporarily a strong desire to write and read about the war. It also means that the war has virtually killed one period of literature, and that it is preparing another. The energy which to-day inspires the pamphlet will to-morrow inspire the poet, dramatist and novelist. The crude and sudden heightening of our interest in life cannot immediately find adequate literary expression. There is energy enough, but the means for employing it are not yet found. New vessels will have to be found for the new liquor. Meantime, as we cannot produce out of the war anything describable as literature, we have to be content with producing execrable *divertissements* and topicalities for the music hall and theatre, indifferent verse for the magazines, and, above all, pamphlets of every sort and size for the

book-stall. The state of literature is the state of Brutus waiting in his orchard :

> All the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream ;
> The genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in council, and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection.

It is not possible to foretell what will be the exact character of this " insurrection "—what sort of literature is going to be wrought of the crude mass of energy and fact which to-day is flung rawly into the market from the sheer inability of the old dispensation to deal with it. One thing alone is clear. It is the fact with which we started and the fact which we have to take into full account in writing of Mr Bernard Shaw to-day : the fact, namely, that all literature hitherto described as " modern " is finally dead. Partly it is an instinctive realisation of this fact that has brought its authors down into the street crying

to be heard. There is hardly an established author of any repute who has not written letters, pamphlets, articles, poems or stories about the war in the last six months, partly out of an unconscious determination to assert publicly that he still intends to hold the public ear and that the war has not put a term to his reputation. It is equally true that the great majority of these authors have only succeeded in demonstrating how grievously they have aged in the six months since August 1914. All that was brilliant, clever, forcible, urgent and momentous but half-a-year ago — the style which pleased us then and the subject which intrigued our imagination —has as completely lost its appeal as an outlived tailor's fashion or popular song. It will be at least fifty years before English literary historians will even begin to understand why, for example, the comedies of Mr Bernard Shaw were popular in 1913. Whatever literature may be like in 1923, it will certainly be

quite unlike the literature of 1913. It is more likely to resemble the literature of the late nineties of the fifteenth century or the middle years of the nineteenth century. For the moment we must wait among our pamphlets, and be satisfied with imagining a *renaissance* which we may not live to see.

Mr Shaw has particularly suffered because of all living writers he was most in touch with the life that has passed. He was intellectually representative of very nearly all that kept our theatre vital and free. Paradoxically our immense debt to him yesterday, as a cleansing and enlivening power, simply intensifies our recoil from his work today. He laboured to destroy much that was evil and stupefying. Then suddenly the war came upon us all and kept away the critic with the life he criticised. Mr Shaw is in the position of one who suddenly sees the work of his life so thoroughly done that it becomes almost impossible for his friends to

realise that it was ever necessary. So catastrophic was the change in our outlook that its purport could not be grasped either by Mr Shaw himself or his readers. For once the elasticity of his supple mind was insufficient. Mr Shaw has made some grave mistakes of late—mistakes which have puzzled his friends and raised in the public varying degrees of enmity, from the exasperated shrug of the stranger, who only knows the comic mask of G.B.S.—now so out of fashion with the time—to the active dislike of those who more seriously regard him. This present defence of Mr Shaw is based on a complete absence of partiality for his errors, together with a fairly clear perception of their motive. It is addressed to those of the public who know, without requiring further proof or discussion, that Mr Shaw is utterly wrong in the greater part of what he has lately written concerning the great events of the last five months. It is, indeed, a postulate of this defence

that Mr Shaw's speeches, letters, and articles on the War are misinformed and untimely—errors of policy and tact. It is the intention of this defence, not to prove that Mr Shaw is right about Belgium and Russia (he is blindly and disastrously wrong), but to show that, though he can be accused of misreading events, and of being utterly out of tune and temper with the present hour, yet he cannot be accused of wilfully detestable levity or of the wish to thrust himself personally forward. His worst offence is that, without being clearly aware of it, he has outlived the time when everything under the sun was also under discussion.

It will be necessary for the purpose of this defence to destroy once for all the popular legend of G.B.S. This legend stands in the way of any just or sensible appreciation of Mr Shaw's present position. It consists of at least seven distinct fallacies—every one of which now weights the balance of public opinion against him.

II

The first fallacy is that Mr Shaw is an immensely public person; that he is a sort of twentieth-century Grand Monarch, who, if manners allowed, would dine like Louis XIV. in the presence of the people. Now it is true that Mr Shaw at one period of his career almost lived upon a public platform; that he invariably tells us the private history of each of his books and plays; that, partly from a sense of fun, and partly from a determination that what he has seriously to say shall be heard, he talks and writes a good deal about himself; and that he has allowed Mr Archibald Henderson to compile a sort of concordance to his personality. Nevertheless, it is not true that Mr Shaw is an immensely public person. Or perhaps I should put it this way: Mr Shaw whom the public knows is not an authentic revelation of the extremely private gentleman who lives in

Adelphi Terrace. Mr Bernard Shaw whom the public knows might more accurately be described as a screen. What the public knows about Mr Shaw is either trivial or misleading. Thus the public knows that Mr Shaw can read diamond type with his left eye at a distance of twenty-eight inches and that he can hear a note whose pitch does not exceed thirty thousand vibrations a second. These things are trivial. Or the public knows that Mr Shaw is a writer of plays, who is a Socialist and publicly conducts himself with a calculated insolence; and these things are misleading. The authentic author of *Man and Superman* has never really been interviewed; has never really "plucked me ope his doublet and offered him his throat to cut" to anyone who is likely to betray him. Mr Shaw of the interviews and the funny stories is public enough; but this Mr Shaw is precisely the legend it is necessary to destroy. When this destruction is accomplished

it will be possible to assert wherein Mr Shaw's talent truly consists; exactly how serious he is; and, more particularly, why he has written articles about the war, and why he should henceforth be restrained from doing so.

III

The second fallacy is that Mr Shaw is a profoundly original thinker and a propagandist of absolutely new ideas. Mr Shaw, who is a modest, conscientious, kindly, industrious, and well-read man of letters, is commonly regarded as a reckless firebrand who lives by the cart and the trumpet; is up to his neck in all that is lawless and improper; is without compassion or shame; speaks always in paradoxes, and claims to be greater than Shakespeare. Mr Shaw has himself repeatedly denied all this without effect. Not less than fourteen years ago he told the world the exact truth about himself

and was not believed. He said he was an elderly gentleman who made an immense reputation by being the best of a bad lot and by plagiarising the English classics. He really meant what he affirmed; but the preface in which he affirmed it is still supposed to be the *locus classicus* of his claim to supersede the author of *Macbeth*. Mr Shaw has repeatedly warned his critics and followers to reject utterly the legend of G.B.S. "I find myself," he wrote in 1900, "while still in middle life, almost as legendary a person as the Flying Dutchman. Critics, like other people, see what they look for, not what is actually before them. In my plays they look for my legendary qualities and find originality and brilliancy in my most hackneyed claptrap. Were I to republish Buckstone's *Wreck Ashore* as my latest comedy it would be hailed as a masterpiece of perverse paradox and scintillating satire." Nothing in modern literary history is more remarkable than Mr Shaw's reputa-

tion for original and daring speculation. Mr Shaw's true position has always been that of a popular lecturer and pamphleteer rather than that of a philosopher. He has popularly presented to the British public the music of Wagner, the drama of Ibsen, an optimist version of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and an individual blend of Socialist ideas collected out of recognised economic authorities from Owen to Gide. He has never been, or claimed to be, an original and creative speculator.

IV

This brings us to the third fallacy. The third fallacy is that Mr Shaw has made enormous and extravagant claims for himself as a critic, political thinker, and dramatist. Let us take a passage of his preface to the *Plays for Puritans*. It is the famous *Better than Shakespeare* passage—the foundation of a public charge that Mr Shaw thinks too highly of

himself. It is a conclusive proof that he does nothing of the kind. Observe also that it harks back to our second fallacy :

> My stories are the old stories; my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloon (note the harlequin's leap in the Third Act of *Cæsar and Cleopatra*); my stage tricks and suspenses and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them. . . . It is a dangerous thing to be hailed at once, as a few rash admirers have hailed me, as above all things original; what the world calls originality is only an unaccustomed method of tickling it. Meyerbeer seemed prodigiously original to the Parisians when he first burst on them. To-day he is only the crow who followed Beethoven's plough. I am a crow who have followed many ploughs.

Who, after this, will say that Mr Shaw has in him a particle of author's conceit ? He has very rarely claimed more than is due to him. It is true that he has frequently and vigorously asserted himself to be not entirely foolish. But it is also true that no critic has more persistently assured the public that there is nothing

really important or new in any of the ideas and devices which so curiously amazed the first audiences of his early plays. Has he not soberly assured us that "the novelties of one generation are only the resuscitated fashions of the generation before last"? And has he not proved this with instances out of *The Devil's Disciple*? Did he not prophesy outright in 1900 that the lapse of a few years would expose that play for "the threadbare popular melodrama it technically is"? Nevertheless, though it is possible for anyone read in Mr Shaw's works to parallel these instances of self-assessment from almost any volume, pamphlet, speech, or anecdote of his life, the belief still rules that Mr Shaw is too highly appreciated by himself. It is essential to get this notion of Mr Shaw as the *miles gloriosus* corrected at the start, otherwise we shall never handle the key to his achievement. It will be asked how it has arisen. It has arisen simply and inevitably from the fact that Mr

Shaw was for many years of his life a professional critic, and that he was by nature able to regard himself and his own performances with complete detachment. Naturally, when he came to write plays, and found that these plays were incompetently criticised, he used his native gift for regarding himself impartially, and his acquired skill as a professional critic, to inform his readers exactly how good and how bad his plays really were. Hence he has acquired a reputation for vainglory, for it is a rooted idea that a man who talks about himself is necessarily vainglorious. Mr Shaw's detached and disinterested observation of his own career and achievements is not within the power of the average man of letters. It was accordingly misunderstood. Not everyone can discuss his own work as though it were the work of a stranger. Mr Shaw's self-criticism, read as a whole, shows an amazing literary altruism. Mr Shaw, in his prefaces, is not a prophet claiming inspiration for his script; he

is one of the crowd that reads and judges for itself—only he reads and judges a little more closely and severely than the rest.

Mr Shaw's curious aloofness from his own fame is the more attractive in that it is absolutely innocent of stage-management. There are men who are famous for their retirement—men of whom it is at once exclaimed how humble and unspoiled they are. Mr Shaw, of course, is entirely free from this organised and blushing humility. His very real modesty consists in his being able to assess himself correctly. He is one of the few living authors who have not been taken in by their own performances. It does not occur to him to divide the literature of the day into (*a*) the works of Mr Shaw and (*b*) other people's works. He thinks of *Man and Superman* as he thinks of *The Silver Box*. It is a play of contemporary interest and of some merit, and he does not see why he should be barred from discussing it as an expert critic

just because he happens to be the author.

There is another and more obvious reason why Mr Shaw is regarded by some as the modern Thraso. Mr Shaw was once fighting an uphill battle to be heard, and one of his principal weapons was a good-humoured insolence in controversy which assumed a truculence not seriously intended, and certainly not corresponding with any loud conceit. He always put things at a maximum, and in a way calculated to anger and arrest his readers. It is hardly necessary to point out how the survival of Mr Shaw's old methods into a period which has suddenly outgrown them has exaggerated his late offences beyond all proportion to their guilt.

V

The fourth fallacy is that Mr Shaw is an incorrigible jester. Almost the first thing to realise about Mr Shaw is his

overflowing gravity. He has taken more things seriously in his career than any living and notable person. He has taken music seriously, and painting, and Socialism, and philosophy, and politics, and public speaking. He has taken the trouble to make up his mind upon scores of things to which the average heedless man hardly gives a second thought, and will give no thought at all in the future —things like diet, hygiene, photography, phonetic spelling, and vivisection. He has even taken seriously the English theatre, unlike virtually every other Englishman of letters who has had anything to do with it. It is only because he is so immensely serious that he has been able to give the impression of being so tremendously casual and brilliant. He is ready for anything because he has seriously considered everything. A first-rate impromptu usually indicates a mind richly stored and well arranged. Mr Shaw can extemporise on most subjects because he has seriously thought

about them. The more brilliantly he sparkles upon a given theme the more sober has been his education in its rudiments. Unfortunately, many people have come to exactly the opposite conclusion. Because Mr Shaw has a rapid and vital way of writing, because he presents his argument at a maximum, seasons it with boisterous analogies, and frequently drives it home at the point of a " foolborn " jest, he is suspected of sacrificing sense to sound. The dancing of his manner conceals the severe decorum of his matter.

VI

The fifth fallacy has to do with the all-head-and-no-heart formula. It is said of Mr Bernard Shaw by some very excellent critics that he is an expert logician arguing *in vacuo* ; that he has exalted Reason as a God ; that his mind is a wonderful

machine which never goes wrong because its owner is not swayed by the ordinary passions, likes, prejudices, sentiments, impulses, infatuations, enthusiasms, and weaknesses of ordinary mankind. Mainly this last superstition has grown out of the fact that Mr Shaw as a critic of music, art, and the drama was actually a critic. He took his criticism seriously, and found it necessary to tell the cruel truth concerning the artistic achievements of many sensitive and agreeable young people. Later, when he came to write plays, there was more evidence of his insensibility, of his arid and merciless rationalism, of his impenetrable indifference to all that warms the blood of common humanity. For Mr Shaw's plays were the work of a critical and destructive intelligence loose among amiable pretences which were once very dear to the playgoer. He depicted young women who "hated" the poor, and young men who appreciated four per cent. But all this had nothing

to do with a triumph of Reason.[1] We must really put all this aside. It is not fundamental. If there is one idea more than another that persists all through Mr Shaw's work it is to be found in his perpetual repudiation of Reason. Almost his whole literary career has been spent in adapting the message of Schopenhauer to his own optimism and belief in the goodness of life. Not Reason and not the Categories determine or create; but Passion and Will. Mr Shaw has always insisted that Reason is no motive power; that the true motive power in the world is Will; that the setting up of Reason above Will is a "damnable error." Life is the satisfaction of a power in us of which we can give no rational account whatever—that is his final declaration; and it corresponds

[1] The significance and character of Mr Shaw's militant work of destruction and purification in the English theatre is discussed in detail in *The Future of the Theatre* (John Palmer). Published by Messrs Bell. 2s. 6d. net.

with the temperament of its author. Mr Rudyard Kipling has described the rationalists as men who "deal with people's insides from the point of view of men who have no stomachs." Mr Shaw would agree. No one, in habit or opinion, lives more remotely than he from the clear, hard, logical, devitalised, and sapless world of Comte and Spencer.

VII

The sixth fallacy is that Mr Shaw is an anarchist, a disturber of the peace, a champion of the right of every man to do as he pleases and to think for himself. This idea of Mr Shaw is altogether at fault. The practical extent of Mr Shaw's anarchism—as was instanced in the British Bluebook wherein a committee of the most respectable gentlemen of the British Bar and Church agreed with Mr Shaw that British divorce was unnecessarily expensive, inequitable, and

humiliating — coincides with the anarchism of our judges and our bishops. Mr Shaw is so far from being an anarchist, that in *The Sanity of Art* he has written down one of the best defences of law and order—of the convenience and necessity of policemen, churches, and all kinds of public authority—that has appeared in popular form within recent years. It is true that he pleads for liberty, and points out that it is better for a man to act and think responsibly for himself than to run to the nearest constable. But it is also true that he wants people to have no more liberty than is good for them, and that he very seriously distrusts the ability of the average person to think for himself. He knows that the average man has neither the time nor the brains nor the imagination to be original in such matters as crossing the road, or getting married, or determining whether murder is justifiable. Nothing could be further from the mind of Mr Shaw than the philosophic anarchy of Godwin or John Stuart

Mill. He is not an anarchist either in speculation or in practice.

VIII

The seventh fallacy is that Mr Shaw is a headlong, dashing, and opiniative writer, without technical equipment, who has succeeded by an impudent trust in his unassisted genius and brought off his best effects by sheer good fortune. This fallacy has stuck to Mr Shaw all through his career as a critic of music, painting, the drama, as a playwright, as a pamphleteer, as a public speaker. When Mr Shaw, as Corno di Bassetto, was writing about music for a London newspaper the public insisted that his appointment was a joke. Mr Shaw played with this popular legend of himself, as he has played with a hundred others. He was thought to be merely a rude young man who knocked the professors' heads together without the least idea of what

they contained. Entirely the reverse was true. Far from being an irresponsible amateur with a literary knack, Mr Shaw, in all he has undertaken, has, if anything, erred from an excessive knowledge and interest in the expert, professional, and technical side of his subject. He knew years ago all about the enormity of exploding undiminished chords of the ninth and thirteenth on the unsuspecting ear, just as to-day he thoroughly understands the appallingly scientific progressions of Scriabin. Similarly he can tell the difference at a glance between real sunshine in an open field and the good north light of a Chelsea studio; or explain why "values" are more difficult to capture when colours are bright than when they are looked for in a dark interior. As to the technique of the theatre—well, the subject is hardly worth discussing. Some of his later plays are nothing if they are not technical. The fallacy that Mr Shaw was a happy savage among critics and artists—ignorant and

careless of form, unread in the necessary conventions, speaking always at random with the confidence that only a perfect ignorance can give—is particularly deplorable, because it necessarily blinds its adherents to his most serious defect. Usually he knows too much, rather than too little, of his subject. He is too keenly interested in its bones and its mechanism. His famous distinction between music which is decorative and music which is dramatic is quite unsound ; but it is not the mistake of a critic ignorant of music. It is rather the mistake of a critic too keenly absorbed in the technique of music. If the professors in the early nineties had objected to Corno di Bassetto because he was liable to lapses into the pedantry of which they themselves were accused, they would have been nearer the mark than they were in foolishly dismissing him as an ignoramus. Similarly, as a dramatic critic, G.B.S. erred, not by attaching too little value to the forms and conventions of the theatre,

but by attaching too much. It is true that he did not make the absurd mistake of some of his followers, and regard Ibsen as a great dramatist on account of one or two pettifogging and questionable reforms in dramatic convention—such as the abolishing of soliloquies and extra doors to the sitting-room. But he certainly attached too much importance to these things—mainly because he knew so much about them ; and this insistence of his as a critic has had its revenge in some of his own plays where his purely technical mastery of theatrical devices, his stage-cleverness, and his craftsman's virtuosity, have led him into mechanical horse-play and stock positions unworthy of the author of *John Bull's Other Island* and *Major Barbara*.

There was a conspicuous instance of this in a late production at the Vaudeville Theatre—possibly the best instance which could be taken of Mr Shaw's readiness to be engrossed in theatrical technique. Mr Shaw not only wrote, he also pro-

duced *Great Catherine*. The mere consenting of Mr Shaw to produce his plays is a clear warning not to regard him as one whose chief talent is to be casual. Only an author with an almost pedantic interest in the technique of the theatre would undertake the drudgery of conducting his own rehearsals. Authors who bring sanity, literary expression, live fun, ideas, sincere feeling—in a word, authors who bring any sort of talent or originality into the professional theatre from outside—are usually too lazy or too contemptuous of the censor-ridden stage of to-day to give their mind seriously to the myriad small things that go to the producing of plays. They leave all this to the professional expert, and sit modestly apart at rehearsal in some corner of the stage where in their inexperience they imagine themselves least likely to be in the way. On the whole it is well that they should. The author's rehearsing, though it may be good for the author's play, is usually bad

for the author. It may turn an author who has original matter into an author who has only a successfully conventional manner. Almost certainly it will do this if the rehearsing author, like Mr Shaw, is personally kind and tolerant, extremely susceptible to the ideas and influences amid which he moves, easily throwing himself with enormous energy into the fun of doing something professionally difficult and entirely new, and always ready to believe that the thing he happens to be tremendously interested in at the time is the thing that he is by nature best fitted to do.

Great Catherine is clearly the play of an author who from long practice and familiarity with the uses of the stage has come to believe that it matters more that his characters shall utter their lines left-centre or back-stage than that their lines shall be worth uttering anywhere. It has every indelible mark of the play of a producing author—of an author who has lost touch for the time being with his

native and original gifts in an enthusiasm for the pedantries of his craft. There is in *Great Catherine* always more care that no point shall be missed by the audience than that the point which must not be missed shall be worth making. There is all through exactly that absolute reliance upon stage business and stage effect, and the neglect of everything else, which makes the script of the modern fashionable play unreadable. There is plainly to be detected in every line of *Great Catherine* an absurd reliance upon technical devices of the theatre to multiply the author's intention, even when the author's intention stands at artistic zero.

Great Catherine, in a word, admirably illustrates our seventh fallacy.

Mr Shaw has continually suffered from knowing his subject too well from the angle of the expert; and he has frequently fallen into the mistakes of the expert. Far from being the happy and careless privateer of popular belief, he is

usually to be found struggling for freedom under the oppression of things stored for reference in his capacious memory. The great critic, like any ordinary, unskilled spectator, should be able to look at a work of art without prejudice in favour of any particular form or fashion. It should not influence his judgment in the slightest whether the music he hears is symphonic or metrical, whether the thirteenth is exploded as a thirteenth or prepared as a six-four chord. He should be similarly indifferent whether a dramatist talks to him in a blank verse soliloquy or in conversational duologue. Preoccupation with manner, *apart from matter*—usually implying an *a priori* prejudice in favour of one manner over another—is the mark of pedantry; and of this pedantry—always the pedantry of a man who is expert and knows too much—Mr Shaw is not always free, though he is far too good a critic to be often at fault.

IX

We will now turn from G.B.S., who is as legendary as the Flying Dutchman, to the very positive and substantial author of *Commonsense and the War*. It has yet to be explained why Mr Shaw, stripped of his professional masks and rescued from the misconceptions of his admirers, remains one of the most striking public figures of yesterday and must fairly be regarded as the most important apparition in the British theatre since Goldsmith and Sheridan. We have seen that he is not original in what he preaches, is erudite rather than adventurous, is in no sense revolutionary or anarchical, is extremely serious, and is far from being an orgiastic and impudent rationalist for whom drifting humanity is mere stuff for a paradox. Mr Shaw has not won the notice of mankind because he has thought of things which have hitherto occurred to no one else ; nor has he won

the notice of mankind because he has a native gift for buffoonery and a talent for the stage. His merit has to be sought outside his doctrine. The secret of his talent lies deeper than his fun, and has scarcely anything to do with his craft.

X

It ironically happens that Mr Shaw as a critic has virtually made it impossible for those who accept his criticism to allow that, as a dramatic author, he has any right to be really famous. Mr Shaw as a critic repeatedly fell into the grievous critical error of separating the stuff he was criticising into manner and matter. Thus, confronted with the Elizabethan dramatists, Mr Shaw always maintained that they had nothing to say, and that they were only tolerable because they had an incomparably wonderful way of saying it. Comparing Shakespeare with Ibsen, for example, he

would point out that, if you paraphrased Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, it still remained good intellectual stuff, and that, if you paraphrased Shakespeare's "Life's but a walking shadow," it became the merest commonplace. He thence proceeded to draw the moral that Ibsen, apart from mere favour and prettiness, was the greater and more penetrating dramatist. Fortunately for Mr Shaw, as we shall shortly realise, this criticism of his was not only false in fact, but it was also nonsense in theory. It was false in fact because it is quite untrue that Shakespeare paraphrased is commonplace, whereas Ibsen paraphrased is an intellectual feast. It would be more to the point if Mr Shaw had said that Shakespeare paraphrased is commonplace for all time, and that Ibsen paraphrased is commonplace for only the nineteenth century. It would be still more to the point if Mr Shaw had said that it is quite impossible to paraphrase any work of genius in so far as genius has

gone to its making. It is absurd to talk of paraphrasing Shakespeare, because Shakespeare is of genius all compact. It is as true of Ibsen as of Shakespeare that, so far as he is a genius and not merely a scientific naturalist, it is absurd to separate what he says from his way of saying it. When Shakespeare has written :

> Out, out brief candle !
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing——

he has written more than the equivalent of "Life is not worth living." If Mr Shaw will not admit that Shakespeare in this passage is no more than an utterer of a universal platitude for pessimists, he will have to agree that Ibsen is no more than an utterer of parochial platitudes for the eugenist platform. Probably, however, now that Mr Shaw has himself become a classical author, he has realised

that to distinguish between the ideas of a literary genius and the language in which they are expressed is as absurd as to distinguish between the subject of a painter and the way in which it is painted, or between the feeling of a musician and the theme whereby it is rendered.

At any rate, Mr Shaw must realise how badly he himself would fare under such a distinction. We have seen that, in doctrine and idea, he is in no sense original. His conception of the State is as old as Plato. His particular sort of Puritanism is as old as Cromwell. His particular brand of Socialism is as old as Owen. A paraphrase of Mr Shaw—a reduction of Mr Shaw to the bare bones of his subject-matter—would be as intolerable as the speeches of his disciples and some of his masters usually are. In a word, if Mr Shaw is worth reading, he is worth reading, not because he has anything new to say, but because he has a passionate and a personal way of saying it. If Mr Shaw can claim an immortality,

however brief, it will not be by virtue of his original, novel, and startling opinions, but by virtue of his literary presentation of them in a manner entirely his own.

XI

Mr Shaw, then, won the attention of his generation, not because he had new theories about the world, but because by virtue of strictly personal and inalienable qualities he was able to give to the most "hackneyed claptrap" (Mr Shaw's own description) an air of novelty. Had he baldly said to us that incomes should be equally divided, and that interest was an iniquitous and profoundly unsocial device invented by those who have too much money for the purpose of levying blackmail upon those who have not enough, we should simply have remembered that we had read all this years ago in an old book and turned to something rather more worth our time and

attention. But when Mr Shaw wrote *Widowers' Houses*, or *Socialism and Superior Brains*, it was quite another matter. Here we had original work of the first quality. The ideas were thread-worn; but the presentation of these ideas was wont to thrill us with a conviction that nothing quite like it had ever come within our experience. We realised that we had never before encountered just this blend of wit and sense, this intellectual thrust and horseplay, this fervour and fun, this argumentative and syllabic virtuosity, this apparently impudent disregard of style which only the more piquantly emphasised a perfectly individual and highly cultivated literary art. Then we began to wonder what was the inspiration of this rapid Jehu. Whence did he get his impulse to drive all these dead ideas so furiously through the modern world? How were we to explain the passion that filled him and lifted his work to levels higher than the platform he undertook to fill? We were

sensible in his best work of a horse-power, of a spiritual energy, which could no more be the product of his doctrinal prejudice against rent and interest than the energy which drove Wagner to compose the *Nibelungen Ring* was the product of his desire to justify his revolutionary principles or to improve the operatic stage scenery of his generation. We knew that Mr Shaw's inspiration must be something deeper than a dislike of Roebuck Ramsden or a desire to abolish Mr Sartorius. We knew, in fact, that Mr Shaw, so far as he had any positive genius at all, was the happy agent of a power and a passion which used his prejudices, memories, and doctrines in a way he was intellectually powerless to resist. Has he not himself written these remarkable words :

> This is the true joy of life : the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one ; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap ; the being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of

ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy?

To apply this passage to the work of Mr Shaw is again to destroy the popular conception of him as merely the acute *raisonneur*, the intellectual critic of his kind, with a wallet of revolutionary propaganda whereby his reputation lives or dies. Not his doctrine, and not his deliberate pamphleteering, made him an influence in "modern" literature. The real secret of his influence could be explained in only one way. Mr Shaw had passion and he had style. Therefore he was driven to say more than he intended, and to say it with an arresting voice.

XII

It remains to ask what was the prime irritant of this passion in Mr Shaw. He has himself revealed it in the preface, which, more than any other, gives us the key to his work and character:

I have, I think, always been a Puritan in my attitude towards Art. I am as fond of fine music and handsome buildings as Milton was, or Cromwell, or Bunyan ; but, if I found that they were becoming the instruments of a systematic idolatry of sensuousness, I would hold it good statesmanship to blow every cathedral in the world to pieces with dynamite, organ and all, without the least heed to the screams of the art critics and cultured voluptuaries.

Mr Shaw's inspiration, that is to say, is not æsthetic, but moral. We have to reckon with a moral fury where he most individually rages. The daemon which seizes his pen at the critical moment, and uses him for its own enthusiastic purpose, is the daemon which drove Milton to destroy Salmasius. Like every other prophet who has succeeded in moving an audience, Mr Shaw begins with a passion and a prejudice, and afterwards manufactures the evidence. That he talked Socialism was an accident of the time. The essential thing was that he passionately hated all that was complacent, malevolent, callous, inequitable,

oppressive, unsocial, stupid, irreligious, enervating, narrow, misinformed, unimaginative, lazy, envious, unclean, disloyal, mercenary, and extravagant. Hating all this with the positive, energetic and proselytising hatred of an incorrigible preacher, he naturally seized the most adequate stick in reach with which to beat the nineteenth-century sinner. This stick happened to be the Socialist stick. If Mr Shaw had lived with Grossetête in the fourteenth century it would have been the no-taxation-without-representation stick. If he had lived with the Star Chamber in the sixteenth century it would have been the Habeas Corpus stick. If he had lived with Rousseau in the eighteenth century it would have been the social-contract-and-law-of-nature stick. Mr Shaw's Socialism stick was simply his weapon —the most convenient weapon to hand— with which to convict a society founded upon capitalism of the greatest possible amount of sin with the least possible

opportunity of an overwhelming retort from the sinner. The important thing was, not that Mr Shaw, as a moralist, preached Socialism, but that he used the doctrines of Socialism as Cromwell's troopers used the psalms of David, or as Tolstoy used the gospel of St Matthew, namely, to put the unjust man and his evil ways out of court and countenance. To this end he employed also his craft as a dialectician, his gift as a stylist, his clear exposition and wit, his fun, irony, observation of men, talent for mystification and effective pose—all, indeed, that now enters into the public idea of G.B.S. These things were merely auxiliary. Any moment they were liable to be caught up in the service of his passionate mission—a mission of which Mr Shaw was often himself unconscious when he was most firmly under its dominion.

No better proof that morality has been the main motive of Mr Shaw's career could be offered than his scandalous

preface to an English translation of three plays of M. Brieux. M. Brieux is an incompetent pamphleteer who has chosen to inflict his earnest moral convictions upon the French theatre—convictions he is unable to present intelligibly or to justify logically to his audience, even though his audience has consented to accept his very doubtful premises. Nevertheless Mr Shaw, in a preface which is offered the public as serious criticism, has spoken of the dramatic work of M. Brieux in terms that would be extravagant if they were used of the plays of Molière. Now Mr Shaw is—or, at any rate, he was—a critic of more than average ability to judge of dramatic merit. Either he knew his estimate of M. Brieux was utter nonsense—in which case he is open to a charge of infamous critical immorality ; or he was led astray by his enthusiasm for social hygiene—in which case his reputation as a dramatic critic was unsound. A man who appears among men of art as a critic, pretending

to talk criticism, and is all the while feeding in himself the secret fires of an unscrupulous moral fervour which perverts his judgment, is guilty of the worst offence against his profession which a critic is able to commit. Mr Shaw's only excuse, morally, is that he did not know what he was doing ; but that is no excuse intellectually. His preface to the plays of M. Brieux calls urgently for explanation and apology, more especially as many respectable critics, including that noisy section of the talking public which lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of a Fabian orator, have accepted Mr Shaw's estimate of M. Brieux without examination, and have begun to require from their friends a full consent to his greatness as a preliminary to any sort of decent social intercourse. For Mr Shaw, who is responsible for all this, his worst enemy can wish no worse retribution than that of having to appear before the bar of our coming generation as the sometime sponsor to the public of

his day for the high dramatic merit of *Les Avariés*.

Meantime Mr Shaw's contemporaries have to choose between two alternative explanations of his blunder. Was it the deliberate conspiracy of an ardent moralist to strengthen the weak knees of a colleague? It is clear to anyone who has tried to write even a short essay on the state of the nation that *Les Avariés* is, intellectually, from end to end a brief mismanaged—that far from having any of the qualities of a good play it has not even the qualities of a good sermon. Almost any bishop in England could do better. Nevertheless Mr Shaw has coolly written that M. Brieux is the one peak in the barren plain of French dramatic literature since Molière. Is he here sinning against the light of criticism as an unscrupulous sectary deliberately making the worse appear the better cause?

Or, on the other hand, is his dereliction the result of a passion for morality

which causes him helplessly to go wrong, without aforethought or malice—which blurs his vision and compels him to write like a planchette ?

Perhaps the alternative explanations are not exclusive. Mr Shaw is willing to be deceived by M. Brieux. He opens himself out to be deceived. He sees that M. Brieux has one redeeming quality and he allows that quality to cover all the æsthetic sins, all the technical incompetence and puzzle-headedness of M. Brieux. The one redeeming quality of M. Brieux—a quality which may well save him in the eyes of a fervent moralist, but which would not influence a disinterested critic of dramatic literature in the least—is a blundering moral sincerity which prompts him to do unskilfully and tediously what Mr Shaw has done in an original and an arresting fashion. There is a kind of dignity which is quite independent of intellectual competence, æsthetic perception, taste, humour, or the power of intelligible expression. It

is a dignity which arises simply from conviction. It is unimpaired by ignorance or folly ; indeed, foolish people frequently have more of this kind of dignity than the wise and prudent. It is comparatively easy for a foolish man to be fervently convinced that he holds a clue to all the evil of the world ; and such a conviction will frequently lend to simple people a dignity which silences the critic, making him realise of what poor account is mere intelligence or imagination beside the magnificence of being morally sure that you are right.

Such is the dignity of which M. Brieux is possessed. M. Brieux has no gift of literary expression. It does not matter —at least it does not matter to Mr Shaw. M. Brieux is unable to present a thesis without spoiling his case. It is of no importance. M. Brieux has no sense of character. It is irrelevant. M. Brieux has no tact in handling an audience. It is not pertinent. M. Brieux has no instinct for avoiding the ridiculous. It is

not necessary. Why should we require these qualities and talents ? M. Brieux has one supreme quality which outweighs them all. He is a prophet. He burns. In spite of the clumsiness with which he presents his doctrine ; in spite of the aridity of his speech, his words all dead and mean and vulgar ; in spite of his inability to marshal his evidence to good advantage, to drive his points logically into our heads, or to convey interest or emotion into our hearts—in spite of all this, M. Brieux commands the respect of Mr Shaw. He has that supreme dignity of the moralist which a thoroughly stupid and unimaginative person can have in the highest degree. Mr Shaw has heard better expositions of our social disgrace in Hyde Park than anything M. Brieux has yet written—more skilfully arranged and more eloquently expressed. But he has never heard anything anywhere which matches *Les Avariés* in its ferocious and unassailable determination to be thoroughly in

earnest. He has seized upon the only argument that survives a moment's criticism of any one of the plays of M. Brieux—the argument, namely, that M. Brieux himself solemnly feels what he is unable intelligibly to express. Nor, of course, is Mr Shaw alone in his instinctive treachery to art and commonsense. Since mankind in bulk is always readier to attend to someone who believes than to someone who explains, being readier to fall under the spell of a really earnest man who blunders than under that of a really clever man who keeps his head, M. Brieux is to-day a member of the French Institute, a moral force in America, and has in England fallen under the ban of the Lord Chamberlain. Meantime it is enough for the purpose of this epitaph to note that Mr Shaw's offence in the matter of M. Brieux is the offence of an unscrupulous preacher who wrests his reading to fit the need of his doctrine. It is a classic instance of his dereliction in that kind. He has committed many

critical offences in his time under the dominion of his master passion, but his puritanism was never so clearly manifestly at work as in his celebration of M. Brieux.

XIII

How then has this master passion contrived to be hidden? How has Mr Shaw come to be celebrated by the public as a man of uncommon levity; as one who abounds in dexterity of intelligence and lawless fun? To begin with Mr Shaw has none of the outward characteristics of the traditional puritan. There is nothing nasal or dour about him. His literary style recalls Wycherley rather than Bunyan. Though fundamentally he has the lean temperament of the sworn enemies of Falstaff and Grangousier there is nothing in the least ascetic in his outward behaviour. His passion of the preacher, which gives him uniformity and purpose as a public figure, has not

impaired his personal humour, his tolerance (disguised though it be under an habitually indignant manner) for all that is sweet and commendable, his broadness of view and eagerly inquisitive outlook upon life, his generous welcome of new ideas, his love of beautiful things, his magpie annexation of all that appeals to his inveterately roving intelligence, his ability to appreciate and sympathise even with these forces which are banded to destroy him. These qualities have obscured from his contemporaries the essential simplicity of his mind.

There is a real rift in Mr Shaw whereby all kinds of things which are not popularly associated with the puritan spirit have entered into his work. Though he was born to labour in vain towards convicting his generation of sin he has also had the secret ambitions of an artist. He cannot help enjoying the best songs even though they belong to the devil. He cannot help seeing that some pictures are great and good which have in them no

relish of salvation. Moreover he himself, though balked at every turn by the instinct which whitewashed English churches in the seventeenth century and smashed the stained glass of their windows, cannot help, in a blind and unsuccessful way, yearning towards the æsthetic Jezebel and her gauds. Though he has never once succeeded in creating a beautiful thing for beauty's sake, there are everywhere pathetic hints that he has had the thwarted impulse to try.

Take, for example, the play in which Mr Forbes Robertson once tried to show us Cæsar in colloquy with the Sphinx. This play is full of defeated longing to arrive at beauty; but the beauty is everywhere nipped. *Cæsar and Cleopatra* proves to us that Mr Shaw, even when he would fly with Icarus, cannot escape the pulpit and the gown. This play can only be grasped as a moral thesis. It is not witty, nor historical, nor poetical, nor heroic. It is simply the urgent presentation by a born preacher

of a man after the preacher's own heart. Mr Shaw's moral earnestness is nowhere more unhappily apparent than in *Cæsar and Cleopatra*. It is sheer doctrine from start to finish. Some critics have dealt with it as a funny play; but *Cæsar and Cleopatra* is not funny. People who pretend that Mr Shaw really means in this "history" to be funny, that he is pulling Cæsar's nose for the amusement of spectators with a taste for coarse pleasantry, that he really intends to get laughter after the cheap fashion of a music-hall entertainer who travesties Shakespeare in references to the Prince of Denmark as Mr Gimlet, must be asked to realise that from end to end of *Cæsar and Cleopatra* the one attribute of Mr Shaw which is conspicuously working at least pressure is his sense of fun. Give Mr Shaw his due. It is insulting to suppose of the author of *John Bull's Other Island* that he is for one moment trying to be funny in conscientiously sustained mispronunciations of Flatateeta.

No : Mr Shaw in *Cæsar and Cleopatra* is in deadly earnest. He has no time for jokes. He does not care whether they be good or bad. He is too seriously concerned with his crusade against something which he was in the habit of describing as "romanticism." This crusade figured in his mind as an endeavour to be rid of shams and come to stern reality. It had nothing really to do with romanticism, but romanticism was in the nineties a sort of swear-word with Mr Shaw. Romantic love, which he ridiculed, was love unblessed by the sect he followed. Romantic history was history which celebrated heroes for virtues not approved by the tabernacle. Imperious Cæsar—the Cæsar of Momsen and Shakespeare—was, in Mr Shaw's view, one of the world's impostors and he exposes him—the traditional Cæsar —with the moral fury of a prophet. That Cæsar at fifty-four is in middle age ; that Cæsar's hair at fifty-four is probably a good deal thinner than Mr Forbes

Robertson will allow; that a four hundred yards' sprint in the sea leaves him with a touch of rheumatism; that one of the chief necessities of a general is a good square meal at least once in twenty-four hours—these are simply points in a pulpit hortation. There is here no intention to be flippant, to commit a sacrilege, to write a comic history of Rome. A comic history of Rome by Mr Shaw would be really funny. This sort of thing, if you insist upon taking it as fun, is dreary beyond expression. But Mr Shaw is in solemn earnest. He rediscovers these things in the spirit of a man who founds a new religion. With the spiritual exultation of a dervish Mr Shaw strips the laurel from Cæsar's brow, exhibiting his bald patch to posterity in the name of truth and the indestructible dignity of man. He destroys the false images of our devotion. He would chasten us with the contemplation of a hero unaffected by any of the weaknesses to which the "romantic" flesh of the

nineteenth century was heir. Just as Cromwell's troopers smashed the saints and heroes in the windows of the churches so Mr Shaw has striven to cut off the haloes from their reputation. We are in *Cæsar and Cleopatra* invited to admire Cæsar without the laurel—Mr Shaw's conception of a hero. The genius of this hero is in hard work ; in seeing men and things as they are ; in being capable of the intellectual detachment which is humour ; in being susceptible to great ideas ; in professional enthusiasm for his task of the moment. Moreover, this hero exhibits his superiority to the common run of men by talking on occasion vigorously and at length, not unlike Mr Bernard Shaw, on the immorality of judicial vengeance.

Nevertheless, and it is this which makes *Cæsar and Cleopatra* worth especial attention, there is, all through the play, a parallel effort of the author to create an illusion of grandeur and beauty, of poetic glamour and illusion.

This, again, we miss if we insist on reading *Cæsar and Cleopatra* as a funny play. To read it as a funny play wherein Mr Shaw, to make people laugh, dresses up an elderly gentleman in a toga, calls him Julius Cæsar, feeds him on dates and barley-water, and so forth, is to miss a very real tragedy of the modern theatre. *Cæsar and Cleopatra* is not the comedy of Julius Cæsar, but the tragedy of Mr Shaw. One feels so distinctly that Mr Shaw, who understands and can estimate so competently the beauty which poets have created, would give his head, and become as an idiot or a little child, if for five minutes he could compass in imagination a tithe of what he so clearly sees and understands; but one also feels that the making of things beautiful is beyond him. See with what critical acumen Mr Shaw has contrived the opening of his play. Cultivated intelligence could no further go than the actual building of his scene—Cæsar confronting the Sphinx, Cleopatra sleeping between her mighty

paws. It is a perfect setting. Nor need we quarrel with Mr Shaw's understanding of Cæsar. There, as he stands before the Sphinx, is Mr Shaw's extremely competent inventory of a great man. We wait upon his words—that we may somehow share the emotion of this great man on this great occasion. Soon we are attending coldly and carefully to a reasoned analysis in excellent prose of the feelings and ideas the Sphinx would probably suggest to a successful person at the height of his career. There is a certain pleasure in following this very efficient bit of exposition. But there is just one thing conspicuously lacking—there is never one moment of illusion. Mr Shaw has formed certain conclusions about Cæsar; but we never for one moment, after he begins to speak, believe that here is Cæsar before the Sphinx in 45 B.C. It is the same unhappy tale throughout. In vain are crowded into a single act—with every invention that a brilliant intellect can suggest, with

every resource of the practised rhetorician —sharp peril and sudden death, feasting and murder, handled with the cunning craft of an author who knows about the theatre everything that is worth knowing and a good deal that is not. The death of Pothinus is utterly unable to wring our æsthetic withers. We watch with a more or less agreeable intellectual excitement a practical exposition of the art of government as understood by very young queens in Eastern countries. Cæsar's subsequent peril is a further practical exposition of the futility of vengeance, of the material as well as moral advantage of forgiving one's enemies. The scene closes in a passage —the emotional climax of the play— wherein we quite coolly accept a number of Mr Shaw's conclusions as to the probable conduct of a really great man in a tight place.

Could anything be more conclusive that Mr Shaw's energy is a moral energy and not the energy of the poet? Even

when he aims at beauty he brings down a text. He has just enough æsthetic virtue in himself to make of him a tolerably sure critic of the great art of the world; and this only makes the sadder his own failure to create in that high kind. He cannot believe that the poor talk of his poet in Candida is really beautiful, and he cannot believe that his Cleopatra sits beside Antony's serpent of old Nile. He can only take upon Shakespeare the moralist's revenge of declaring that the immortal longings of Shakespeare's lovers are ethically reprehensible. That is all Mr Shaw's criticism of Shakespeare's Antony and of Shakespeare's plays at large really comes to in the end.

XIV

Mr Shaw's puritanism being established, we at once come within view of Mr Shaw's letters and speeches on the war. It is natural in a preacher that the

most unpardonable sin of the many he is called to denounce should be the sin of complacency; for the sin of complacency virtually amounts to the sin of refusing to hear what the preacher has to say; or, at all events, of refusing to take it very seriously. Mr Shaw has said continuously for many years that the average man is an unsocial sinner; and the average man, instead of hanging his head and mending his ways, has smiled in the face of the prophet. At one time the prophet was stoned, and at another he was poisoned, or ostracised, or pelted. But we have learned a more effective way of dealing with a prophet. Either we turn him into a society preacher, and enjoy his denunciation of what our neighbours do; or we pay him handsomely to amuse us in the Press. We thus aim at destroying not only the body of the prophet, but also his conscience—usually with some success.

But we have never quite succeeded with Mr Shaw, who has continued to be

periodically stirred to frenzy by his inability to make everyone realise that he or she is directly responsible for all the crimes and miseries of modern civilisation. Moreover, because Mr Shaw has lived most of his life in England, and has therefore been less seriously taken in England than elsewhere, he has wrongly concluded that the English are more complacent than any other people in the world. More and more he has come to regard it as his special mission to humble this imagined complacency—to convict the Englishman, above all men, of sin and of the necessity for humility and repentance. Therefore, whenever the British public becomes, in the view of Mr Shaw, unduly exalted—whenever, in fact, it has a reason to be proud of the British name—Mr Shaw is at once suspicious, and usually incensed. Latterly he has been unable to resist any occasion of pricking the inflation, real or imagined, of the British spirit; and latterly, misled by habit, and exaggerating the sins

he was born to chastise, he has made some serious mistakes.

XV

Thus, when more than two years ago the whole British nation was struck with grief at the loss of the *Titanic*, and was reading with a reasonable pride of the splendid behaviour of her heroic crew, Mr Shaw rose in his robe of the prophet, and told the public not to exaggerate its vicarious gallantry. Then in August 1914, when Great Britain was straining every nerve to get her army to the Continent in time to save Belgium from the worst of war, Mr Shaw published an article in the British Press to the mistaken and mischievous effect that Great Britain's action had very little to do with the sanctity of treaties, or the rights of a little nation. Finally he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Commonsense and the War*. This pamphlet has caused much brain-

searching among those who have simply regarded Mr Shaw as a very discreet and financially successful mountebank; for Mr Shaw, in writing this pamphlet, has done a clearly unpopular thing, which has undoubtedly angered and estranged many of his admirers. Some regard the pamphlet as an obscure attempt to discredit the Allied cause. Others regard it as an escapade of hateful levity, inexpedient from a patriotic point of view and essentially wrong in its conclusions. The real point that concerns us here is that the pamphlet is not a new, unexpected, or isolated performance. It is simply a topical and a later edition of *Widowers' Houses:* that is to say, it is a tract in which the case against complacency—it differs from *Widowers' Houses* only in being a wholly imaginary case—is put at a maximum by a fearless and passionate advocate for the prosecution.

Not Mr Shaw, but the time, has changed. Here we strike at the root of

Mr Shaw's mistake. Hitherto he was doing salutary work in his campaign against the silent self-assurance of the mean, sensual man. So long as Great Britain was at peace with her neighbours, it was not altogether amiss that Mr Shaw should imagine that the British, among whom he lived, were guiltier of the sins he was eager to chastise than any other extant community, and that he should lose no opportunity for satirical, ironical, comic, or didactic reproof. But, when Great Britain and her Allies had their back to the wall—when there were opponents to be countered and met—Mr Shaw's insular mistake that the British as a nation are any more complacent than any other nation with a past to be proud of, and a future to believe in, became a really injurious heresy. It began, indeed, to look rather like giving away his own people to the enemy. The patriotism of *Commonsense and the War* is less apparent to the audiences which laugh at Bernard Shaw in the theatre,

and regard him as a privileged Fool at the court of King Demos, than the fact that it begins by asserting that Sir E. Grey is a Junker, and goes on to examine very particularly whether we have really the right to condemn our enemies without a preliminary inquiry into our own affairs. Mr Shaw has looked so long for complacency in the British people that he has neglected to perceive that, when British complacency is scratched, there is found a very solid prejudice beneath it in favour of fair dealing and honour. The least of the politicians knew in August last that the British public, which could not be made to realise its own immediate peril, or to perceive that our friendship with France and Russia committed us absolutely to war—as assuredly it did—that this " complacent " and immovable public would be raised as one man by the cry of Belgium invaded. That is why our public orators in those days invariably pinned our whole case upon the violation of Belgian neutrality. It was

the surest and quickest way to drive home the necessity of war to the nation. It was not the prime motive of the statesmen and diplomatists. These understood that peace with honour was impossible from the moment that France and Russia were engaged. But Belgium was certainly the motive which raised and united the whole country. That was why the half of the Cabinet which thinks first of popular feeling waited and watched; and that is where Mr Shaw was profoundly wrong. He has grounded upon the shallows where at last all logical craft are wrecked which steer by syllogisms at the English character.

Mr Shaw's *Commonsense and the War* was a mischievous document which was less than fair to his own people at a time when we could not afford to give points away to the enemy. But it was not prompted by a wish to splash in waters too deep for the purposes of exhibition. It was the fruit of its author's moral wish that we should go into the war with clean

consciences and an open view. *Common-sense and the War* falls naturally into line with the *Plays for Puritans* and the *Fabian Tracts.*

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